

## Things we suspect of each other! (Symposium)

### LECTURES

#### **Boris Buden**

##### **Curating the past**

Our time is obsessed with the past. Pierre Nora calls it "fetishistic memorialism" and argues that we live in an "age of commemoration" whose most important feature is a close tie between our interest in the past – both real and imaginary – and the sense of belonging, collective consciousness, memory, and identity. In the age of commemoration the past appears to us primarily as (another) culture. In terms of a concrete object, it has the form of cultural heritage. At stake is a shift from history to memory. Not only is the modern concept of history as subject that (oriented by the revolutionary idea) creates its own temporality replaced by a vast heterogeneity of memorial practices; the historians, once the sole experts in historical truths, have lost their monopoly over the interpretation of the past. In its manufacturing they now have to share their role with others – with the judge, the witness, the media, the legislator – and, we can add, with the artist and with the curator, especially the latter. Moreover, one might say that the contemporary practice of curating provides the general paradigm for the production of the past today. Historical narratives, which no longer come from single sources, be it historiography as an objective science or the ideology of a political force that has imposed its cultural hegemony on the society, are created today through a sort of curatorial intervention into the all-encompassing realm of culture. They are the result of a relatively arbitrary selection of objects and narratives as well as of a no less arbitrary combination of scientific, cognitive, visual, political or artistic elements. And they are generated through an also arbitrary orchestrated collaboration of diverse institutional, political, economic or social actors, both private and public, including the ever-broadening realm of the new social media. What we perceive as past today is an arbitrary curated cultural memory. The question is, however, what happens to the narratives and objects omitted by such a curatorial intervention? Do they return to our collective memory as the repressed—in its pathological way – usually does?

#### **Roger Buergerl**

##### **The Goddess of the Rail Tracks**

On the night of the bombing in Berlin the Tell Halaf Museum was destroyed. In 1943, Basalt statues from Mesopotamia exploded into a thousand pieces (so much for saying that the world's art treasures fare better in the West).

The driving force behind the private museum was the German-Jewish diplomat and hobby

archaeologist Max von Oppenheim. The Pergamon Museum in Berlin, which was the intended destination for the exhibits, knew nothing of the statues - at least not at the time.

During his travels, the Nomads had led Oppenheim to Tell Halaf, a burial mound on today's Syrian-Turkish border. At the time, Oppenheim was traveling in the region to scout out the route of the Baghdad Railway. This gigantic infrastructure project was a joint initiative of the Ottoman and German empires. The idea was that a direct connection between Berlin and Baghdad (via Constantinople) would serve both troop transport and trade, strengthening the strategic position of the two empires vis-à-vis France and the United Kingdom.

Among the pieces destroyed in 1943 was the 3000-year-old Enthroned Goddess. After reunification, the Berlin museums have genuinely struggled to reassemble the statue out of its basalt puzzle pieces. In addition to the re-assembled original with its modern-era scars (now in the Pergamon Museum), there exists a plaster cast which Oppenheim had had made on site and which shows the statue in its integrity.

The plaster cast of the Enthroned Goddess was shown in 2018 as part of the exhibition Mobile Worlds (MKG Hamburg) on the initiative of Kurdish and German activists. They need the goddess. Less so in Hamburg, however, than in northern Syria, where the goddess is to take on the role of a pre-Islamic leader and help in building a feminist society. This too is a part of the journey. We wonder: what paths through history, the present and the future shape an object such as this?

## **Pierre Déléage**

### **Infinite Books: The Case of Xocén**

Oral tradition among the Mayans of Xocén (Yucatan, Mexico) describes an extraordinary book placed by God near a rock in the village when he created the world. It is said that this book measures one meter by one meter and is bound in deer leather dyed red.

The book, written in Mayan language, is very thick: it contains the entire past history of humans and animals as well as the entire future history, especially that of the end of the world. The book is considered alive: nobody wrote it. Thus it can only be read till the present day, the following pages are an irremovable block. Each day one new page is open and if anyone turns it intentionally, the book cries tears of blood. Only Mayan scholars and priests were able to read the book. According to this same oral tradition, the book was stolen from the inhabitants of Xocén in the middle of the 20th century. North American adventurers are suspected: they would have taken the book back to their country - which could explain the contemporary technological and economic dominance of the United States.

The Mayas are the descendants of one of the four human civilizations who invented writing. For more than 2500 years, they have experienced an uninterrupted scriptural practice. Scribes promptly appropriated Latin writing during the Spanish conquest. They first wrote down the ritual and theological manuscripts known as Chilam Balam and then the proclamations of Juan de la

Cruz in the context of the theocracy stemming from the Caste War in the 19th century. As a result, there are many books in Mayan language throughout Yucatan.

Did the book of Xocén really exist? Perhaps, but certainly not in the extraordinary form of an infinite book containing the absolute knowledge. But then again, what is this book that the Maya keep, locked in a safe, in the library located at the heart of the village of Xocén?

### **Clémentine Deliss**

#### **Authorship and Provenance. Reflections on Lotte or the Transformation of the Object**

When the exhibition Lotte or the Transformation of the Object opened at the Styrian Autumn of 1990, there were no labels to identify any of the works in the exhibition. It did not matter that Jeff Koons was being shown for the first time in Austria. Nor that other works appeared to merge formally, blurring the categories between the West and non-West, mass and individual methods of production.

What was the intention at the time and what curatorial ruse was deployed? Why suspend authorship and deny the public the right to context? Has the recent focus on provenance changed anything?

### **Doreen Mende**

#### **Curatorial Politics for a Metabolic Agora**

Why is the question of knowledge in contemporary curatorial work masquerading a deeper force of violence? What can curatorial politics do for us in this situation? The talk will elaborate on key concepts such as archival metabolism as constitutive for fostering a curatorial becoming amidst a planet in profound transformation: Learning from archive-based projects, I will argue for the need for an archive theory of the 21st century that accommodates the capacity to hear, support and articulate the practices of multi-vocal readings across geographies, time-zones, generations, and political systems. Despite the multi-vocal imperative as emancipatory proposal for the 21st century archive, however, celebrating the unfolding of multi-vocal narrations of knowledge does not yet change institutional structures but feeds, and thus, reinforces systemic supremacy. Therefore, considering our era of 'data-behaviourism' (Antoinette Rouvroy), we need to inhabit the question of knowledge by politicizing the work of research in contemporary curatorial processes. It takes us to an understanding of the curatorial as a mode of production that shifts display practices beyond the curation of knowledge towards the necessity to build conditions for articulating a 'metabolic agora' (Benjamin Bratton). Curatorial politics, therefore, thickens the terribly entangled threshold that connects as well as separates the zones of 'active research' (as proposed by tranzit for this symposium) and monocultural innocence (as imposed by, e.g., racial nationalism, institutional security). The approach will be exemplified through the current seminar-project the many voices of les indiennes with students and interlocutors of the CCC Research Master Program at HEAD Geneva, Switzerland.

### **Friedrich Tietjen & Herbert Justnik**

#### **"I know that!" Private Photography in the Museum**

"I know that!", say many visitors in front of the pictures of the exhibition, "Everybody line up! It's time to snap!" Private photography in Austria 1930-1950: In fact, the photographs could blend into practically any family album, and in their themes and iconographies they also resemble the digital images of today's social media. Above all, private photography is a medium of the good life, and the notions of it are apparently quite uniform and constantly valid: that one spends time with family and friends, that one can travel, that the children play and are happy, and that one does not work or merely in one's own garden. On the one hand, private photography provides insights not only into social conditions, but also into ideas and desires. On the other hand, its images often collide with the knowledge and narratives of history: While some flee, others go on holiday; while some are destroyed, others celebrate contemplative Christmas celebrations; and while some plunder countries, others try to save their belongings, and this often includes private photographs of holiday trips, for example, and of Christmas celebrations. The images of the perpetrators, the victims and the followers can be indistinguishable, and so private photography is not a medium of unambiguity, but rather an uncanny reminder of the similar world of ideas and desires in which all actors lived and live.

### **Celine Wawruschka**

#### **Identity and meaning: transforming entities in the interpretation of museum objects. A case study on the Volkskundemuseum Wien**

Within museum studies and history, attention has been paid to questions of agency and meaning production as well as the narrative space of the museum. At the centre of these three museological aspects is the object exhibited in the museum.

In my presentation I explore how the interpretation of selected objects in the Volkskundemuseum Wien/Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art changed through different regimes of ethnology between 1897 and 2018. Changes in the interpretation can be identified in object classifications, the positioning of the objects within the museum, and the space devoted (or not) to their description in the museum guides. Even if the position of an object was never changed within the museum, its identity and its meaning have changed over time. The succession of identities and meaning ascribed to these objects reflects not only contemporary perspectives and scholarship in the curatorial practice; the transformation of the epistemological framework that surrounded the material culture of Austria inevitably carries also ideological messages and thus correlates with the changing circumstances and political regimes in the decades between the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the Second Republic.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Boris Buden** is a writer, cultural critic and translator based in Berlin. He received his PhD in cultural theory from Humboldt University. In the 1990s he was editor of the magazine *Arkzin* in Zagreb. His essays and articles cover the topics of philosophy, politics, cultural and art criticism. Among his recent books are *Zone des Übergangs*, (Frankfurt/Main, 2009), *Findet Europa*, (Vienna, 2015), *Transition to Nowhere* (Berlin, 2018). Buden is permanent fellow at the European Institute of Progressive Cultural Policies, Vienna.

**Roger M. Buergel** is the Founding Director of the Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich (Switzerland), a privately funded institution intent to lose itself in the abyss of global modernity. Buergel is a writer and curator who oversaw *Mobile Worlds* at the Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg (2018); *Suzhou Documents* at the Suzhou Museum of Art in China (2016); *Garden of Learning*, the Busan Biennale 2012, and *Documenta 12* (2007). With the cultural sociologist Sophia Prinz he is writing a book on the "migration of forms".

**Pierre Déléage** is a full-time CNRS researcher at Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, Paris. He has explored the transmission of ceremonial chants among the Sharanahua of the Western Amazon (*Le Chant de l'anaconda*, 2009), the invention of writing systems among Native North Americans (*Inventer l'écriture*, 2013) and the reverse anthropologies of Native Andean societies (*Lettres mortes*, 2017). He is currently developing an anthropology of metaphysical imagination.

**Clémentine Deliss** is a curator, publisher and cultural historian born in London to French-Austrian parents. She studied contemporary art and semantic anthropology in Vienna, Paris, and London and holds a PhD from the University of London. In 2017-2018, she was Visiting Professor at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts Paris-Cergy (ENSAPC). She has held guest professorships at several art academies including the Städelschule Frankfurt, the Academy of Fine Arts in Oslo, and the Edinburgh College of Art. She has acted as an expert consultant for the European Union and is a member of the Scientific Council of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. In 2015-16, she was a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute of Advanced Study Berlin). She is Faculty at Large in curating at SVA, School of Visual Arts, New York.

**Herbert Justnik** works as curator and director of the photo collection Volkskundemuseum Wien. He wonders in his projects how exhibiting can be understood as a process of exchange and knowledge production. He experiments with performative and participative approaches in exhibiting, teaching and lending, thematically repeatedly working around issues of visibility and materiality. He has researched historical scientific photography.

**Doreen Mende** is an independent curator and theorist, currently Associate Professor for

Curatorial Politics and Head of the CCC Research Program (Master and PhD-Forum) of the Visual Arts Department at HEAD Genève in Switzerland. Since 2015, she is co-founding director of the Harun Farocki Institut in Berlin. Her most recent work is the research installation Hamhung's Two Orphans commissioned by Bauhaus imaginista project for its iterations in Moscow and Berlin (2018/19), and an article on the East-German film-collective defa-futurum contracted by the Oxford Reader of Communist Visual Cultures (2019)

**Friedrich Tietjen** is a researcher, curator and university lecturer in Vienna and Leipzig. Recent research and exhibition topics include, but are not limited to, the use and distribution of family photographs, the aesthetics of the Hitler mustache, photography and death, and multiples and other forms of serial art. His publications address mainly topics from the field of photography along with essays on art, fashion, design and film.

**Celine Wawruschka** is a research associate at the Danube University Krems at the Department for Arts and Cultural Studies since March 2018. In her current research she focuses on the socio-cultural and historical context of historiography, museology and history of science in the long 19th century.